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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have tried to identify validity as a single characteristic, an alternative path treats validity as a confluence of characteristics, a multifaceted concept that is a product of the function of argument in a given context. From a functional perspective on argumentation, validity criteria change as the speaker's purpose is redefined in various circumstances. The arguer's motive, the demands of the scene, and the predispositions of the audience may well be the key determinants of validity and thus the rationality of any argument. As in Robert Rowland's essay "On Defining Argument," argument can be defined as an activity in which people support claims by offering reasons, the purpose of the activity being to act rationally. However, this definition should be expanded to include the notion that determination of rational argument is dependent on full regard for the richness of the rhetorical situation. Ordinary speakers, socialized in the rules of common discursive practice, can identify relevant validity characteristics in the variety of situations in which they find themselves. Teachers of argument should aim to develop a critical attitude in students that will allow them to separate worthy and unworthy claims in the variety of circumstances that make up argumentative practice. (Seventeen footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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DISTINGUISHING THE ORDINARY AND TECHNICAL SENSES OF VALIDITY

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In the first act, the hero as logician strode arrogantly onto the stage, sneered at the ordinary speaker, and proclaimed validity as the privileged standard of deductive argument.[1] In the second act, a new hero, dressed in the garb of the idealist, walked to center stage, censured the ordinary arguer for amoral behavior, and announced that validity was a privileged ideal standard best approximated by philosophical argument.[2] In the third act, another heroic character appeared, this one costumed as an enigmatic functionalist, he turned to the orchestra and said that validity as a privileged concept was a hoax after all and that the term's true meaning resided in its reference-in-use.[3] But during the remainder of his performance the audience grew restless as this so-called hero of the ordinary speaker turned the play into a farce. He began to talk about "logical types" and the jurisdictions of the "academic disciplines."[4] This self-styled logician of the people was the philosopher prince in pauper's clothing. He was only a half-hearted populist; a Eugene McCarthy trying to act like a Eugene Debs.

Irony is the mode of just desserts by which the audience discovers that "the hero's power of action is inferior" to that of ordinary people.[5] In the academy's story of validity, the audience has become increasingly aware that the grounds of reasonable argument are discoverable in practice and not imposed on practice from the godly perch of the philosopher-critic. The final act of this ironic comedy will dispose of the blocking characters and an ordinary speakers' democracy will again govern the world of argument. At the play's end, our former heroes will realize that they were powerless against

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common practice.

In what follows, we examine the question of validity and the procedures for identifying a valid argument. In each section our intention is to clarify the concept of validity from the _is_ of practice and not the _ought_ of academic imperialism.

THE QUESTION OF VALIDITY

"On what grounds may an argument be labeled valid?" This is the question that has created all the controversy. Literally, the question rather than the answer is a source of misunderstanding.

The question itself is ambiguous. Some want to read the question, "On what grounds _is_ an argument labeled valid?" Others want to read it, "On what grounds _ought_ an argument be labeled valid?" This is-ought dichotomy is a source of trouble. To concern ourselves with the first interpretation of the question is to be labeled radical relativists. Critics will charge that this procedure necessarily commits the analyst to the position that whatever is done ought to be done. On the other hand, to concern ourselves with the second interpretation is to be tarred with the brush of dogmatism. Critics will sarcastically ask, "Who died and made you king of what is and is not worthy argument?"

Our path is to embrace the original question's ambiguity. David Hume's is-ought gap is an _analytical_ and not an _empirical_ distinction.[6] The gap does not exist in argument practice but only in argument analysis. "Validity" _is_ used in practice to communicate the force of _ought_. How can one in practice ever examine argumentative action and separate the defining utterance from the agent's purpose? This rush to reduction is a lingering scientism. Because social scientists were frustrated by the specter of unquantifiable purpose,

they decided that purpose was either not real or not important and thus chose to regard action as mere physical motion.[7] If we stand firm and refuse to separate speakers' interests from their utterances, the relativism-dogmatism dilemma is no longer pertinent.

Admittedly, this last move has the sound of a trick. We do not think it is, but we are prepared to offer a less esoteric proof. The brute facts speak for themselves. For the charge of relativism to have force, advocates must show that in practice whatever argument is accepted is judged as what ought to have been accepted. But in practice, ordinary speakers do not equate effective argument with worthy argument. In everyday discourse arguers harshly criticize all kinds of effective claims.

Nearly every semester Ron has his undergraduates engage in a simple exercise that demonstrates this point. He presents a series of ethically troublesome cases of communication. These cases are grouped into categories labeled deception, manipulation, and coercion. During a class period students flesh out the ethical implications of these cases. When the class meets again, a vote is taken on whether the students would label the individual cases ethical or unethical. Of the six cases, the class is nearly unanimous in its judgment of five. The sixth is an instance of a troublesome ethical activity that is presently undergoing societal re-evaluation.[8] Each of the sample cases were presented as effective; yet, students could come to consensus judgments about their worthy or unworthy character.

How did they recognize the ethical character of each case in such a disparate group of examples? How were they able to separate the fact of effectiveness from the quality of worthiness? This is the key to identifying an ordinary sense of validity.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF VALIDITY

We can hear two versions of a song, sung in different keys with different arrangements, and recognize both renditions as the same song. We can see a painting we have never seen before and recognize it as a Rembrandt. We can see a house from the curb and in a descending 747 and know each time we have sighted the same house. This is the paradox of identity; the discovery of similarity out of difference.

Scholars have tried to identify validity as a single characteristic. This reduced the worthiness of argument to formal relations, audience acceptance, arguer intention, or some other variable. The alternative path is to treat validity as a confluence of characteristics. Admit that different variables of the argumentative situation become key at different times. Standing in the street, we may identify a house by reading the address off the curb. Descending to the airport, we may identify the house by placing its location in relation to railroad tracks or a shopping mall. Issues of identity are never reducible to a single facet, but only to a cluster of facets in some organized relation to one another.[9]

The challenge is to explain the identification of argument worthiness when different standards are operative in different contexts. The linguistic operation that transfers meaning from one domain to another is metaphorical. A metaphorical understanding is the recognition of "resemblances which ordinarily pass unnoticed."[10] These resemblances ordinarily go unnoticed because metaphors compare across seemingly noncomparable subject domains. Metaphors work because listeners are able to sort through the differences in search of significant similarities.

Sixteen years ago, an essay, largely read as a clever illustration of the work of Henry Johnstone and Maurice Natanson, struck at the metaphorical qual-

ity of validity.[11] Wayne Brockriede's "Arguers as Lovers" employed a sexual metaphor to illustrate three stances toward argument. There are no literal similarities between arguers and rapists, seducers and lovers, but the metaphor, nonetheless, was instructive.

Ironically, the power of Brockriede's approach was unintentionally demonstrated by the critical response of Evan Blythin.[12] Although generally approving of Brockriede's project, Blythin found the sexual metaphor wanting for lack of definitional clarity. He missed the point: rape, seduction, and love are ambiguous acts. The utterance of an argument judged valid is an ambiguous act. All complex human actions are ambiguous in the abstract.

The metaphor's ambiguity is its power. For sake of illustration, consider how difficult it is to define rape by the use of a single characteristic. Rape as pure act, devoid of considerations of purpose or agency, is indistinguishable from seduction or love. The act of sexual congress is itself a necessary constituent of rape, but alone it is incapable of defining rape. Add scene to the act and you still cannot distinguish rape from seduction and love. Some couples, we understand, enjoy playing out scenes of sexual domination. Such playful scenarios hardly constitute rape. Add the agency of power to the definitional map of rape. The fact that power is used still does not separate the true rapist from the domination fantasy of our consenting couple. But if we finally add purpose to all the other dimensions, rape can be accurately identified. The purpose of the rapist is to force an act of sexual congress through the agency of power without regard to the wishes of the victim. Identification of rape is only possible when a confluence of characteristics are mapped.

Similarly, a valid argument is identifiable only when a cluster of characteristics are present. First, argument as pure act--utterance--provides insufficient information to evaluate validity. Contingent arguments do not fit

the form of deductive argument. In addition, it is certainly possible to present a worthless argument that fits the formal criteria. Second, add scene to the act and you still cannot distinguish good from bad argument. Scenes that appear to encourage sound argument provide sign evidence of validity but are insufficient alone to make such a judgment. We all are aware of disingenuous arguments carried on among close friends, among academics, among clerics, and even among participants on panels at the Central States Speech Convention. Scene may facilitate valid argument, but can never assure it. Third, add the agency of impartial and open presentation. Assume the arguers reveal their assumptions, lay out the steps used in reaching their conclusions, and present quality evidence. All of these steps may be followed in the cause of bad arguments. Finally, usher in arguers with selfless purpose. Admit only arguers who are concerned with the discovery of truth and not with power or ego. Sincere arguers advance awful arguments all the time. The true believer is sincere but misguided. Yet, all these elements together compose a valid argument.

The puzzle comes because some of these markers are relevant in some circumstances and not in others. For example, arguments from authority are perfectly valid in particular circumstances and completely unacceptable in others. Consider the following two examples:

EXAMPLE ONE

> A squad of men out on a combat surveillance mission comes under enemy fire. The sergeant in command orders Private Smith to move to the left flank. Private Smith enquires of the sergeant, "Why is this a wise battle strategy." The sergeant replies, "Because I said so."

EXAMPLE TWO

In a graduate seminar, a student asks the professor, "Why should I believe that Hume had a greater effect than Reid on George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric?" The professor replied, "Because I said so."

In example one, the argument, "taking the left flank is a good combat strategy because I said so," is valid. Under the specified conditions, this was probably the only valid reason to offer in support of the claim. To offer any other reason, would lead us to ask if the sergeant actually was concerned about the welfare of his men.

In example two, the argument, "students are to accept Hume as having a greater effect on the Philosophy of Rhetoric than Reid because I said so," is obviously invalid. The circumstances call for the presentation of convincing evidence and not reliance on authority. Facts not power are at stake. The professor has misread the situation and assumed that his judgment is at stake rather than the merits of a factual claim.

In these two examples, act, agency, and purpose are the same. The difference is that the purpose of affecting instant obedience is appropriate in combat and not in a graduate seminar. With little difficulty argument scenarios can be created that turn on agent, act, or agency rather than purpose. But the lesson remains the same, it is the relationship among the constituents of argument and not the constituents themselves that determine validity.

CONCLUSIONS

Our perspective on argumentation is functional. We contend that validity criteria change as the speaker's purpose is redefined in various circumstances. But this view is a significant departure from other functional treatments of argument.

Robert Rowland's recent essay, entitled "On Defining Argument" in Philosophy and Rhetoric, is a defense of the central place of purpose in characterizing argument. Functional commitments lead Rowland to define argument as "discourse in which people attempt to solve problems rationally by supporting their claims with reasons and evidence."[13] Thus with this definition in hand, Rowland limits the domain of the argument critic. He writes, "[I]t is important to understand that the critic of argument should not be concerned with all the persuasive appeals presented in a speech or essay. Nor should the critic be concerned with why an audience is influenced in a particular way or with the motives behind a speaker's actions." He continues that the task of the critic of argument is only "concerned with the reasons and data supporting a conclusion and not with the other aspects of the discourse or situation."[14] This permits Rowland to demonstrate that the sphere of argumentation is much smaller than the sphere of rhetoric.[15]

The problem with this view is that the key term is not functionally defined. What does the word "rational" mean in Rowland's definition? "To solve problems rationally" is the purpose of argument. Rowland assumes that the term "rational" self-evidently leaves out all considerations of motive, situation, and influence. He assumes that persuasion and argumentation are distinct domains of practice because rationality and effectiveness are separate. But on what possible grounds can he support this claim? Is it reasonable at all to suppose that ordinary speakers argue without consideration

for achieving an effect? Or that they label arguments "good arguments" without any consideration for their potential to wield influence?

Of course, our answer is that any such set of suppositions are nonsense. Embedded in Rowland's claim is the unstated assumption that rationality is a privileged term. Every other element of argument is defined by function but rationality is defined by edict. To say that an argument was carried on rationally is to say that the participants were concerned with validity. For critics to pronounce an argument rational is to say that it met the relevant standards of validity. Thus, we argue that an arguer's motive, the demands of the scene, and the predispositions of the audience may well be the key determinants of validity and thus the rationality of any argument.

We agree with Rowland and others who have defined argument as an activity in which people support claims by offering reasons. We also agree that the purpose of the activity is to act rationally.[16] However, determination of rational argument is dependent on full regard for the richness of the rhetorical situation.

Consideration of Rowland's own example will attest to the point we are making. He writes, "It is easy to imagine a public debate in which one speaker advocates handgun control based on five or six compelling reasons, while a representative of the National Rifle Association says simply, 'Only Commies and queers are against guns.' In that situation it would be easy to evaluate the arguments for gun control as superior to the one against it."[17] First, notice that no specific reasons are offered for handgun control but the author assures the readers that they were "compelling." Second, notice that no analysis of the NRA argument is offered because the writer assumes that the reason is self-evidently bad. If we take his use of the term "compelling" at face value, we certainly can think of audiences who would find, and probably have found, this form of ad homimen argument "compelling."

There are certainly cases of reasonable public dispute that focused on the supporters of the case. For example, the support of Louis Farakan was taken as justification for opposing the 1984 candidacy of Rev. Jackson. The communist support of Henry Wallace was taken as justification for opposing his 1948 run for the presidency. Consideration of supporters is reasonable because it provides insight into what future actions a candidate might take. In Rowland's own example of the NRA argument consideration of the opposition's hidden motives, although put in inflammatory language, is not wholly irrelevant. If Americans were convinced that handgun restrictions were favored by subversives for the purpose of weakening civil resistance that would constitute a "compelling" argument against such legislation. In other words, there is nothing in the form of the argument that ipso facto makes it unworthy or noncompelling.

The examination of Rowland's analysis strengthens our central claim; validity is a multifaceted concept that is a product of the function of argument in a given context. The confluence of variables that determine validity make up a situational grammar. Ordinary speakers, socialized in the rules of common discursive practice, can identify relevant validity characteristics in the variety of situations in which they find themselves. Our responsibility as teachers of argument is to facilitate in our students a critical attitude that can separate worthy and unworthy claims in the rich variety of circumstances that make up argumentative practice.

NOTES

[1] An explication and critique of this imperial view of the logician is presented in C. L. Hamblin, Fallacies (London: Methuen, 1970) 224-52.

[2] A number of argument theorists might be labeled idealists, but we were particularly thinking of Johnstone and Ehninger. See Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument (University Park, PA: Dialogue Press, 1978); and Douglas Ehninger, "Validity as Moral Obligation," Southern Speech Communication Journal 13 (1969): 215-22.

[3] Stephen Toulmin described himself as a "functionalist" in The Examination of the Place of Reasons in Ethics (London: Cambridge UP, 1950). He continued in this role when turning his attention to the construction of a "working logic" in The Uses of Argument (London: Cambridge UP, 1958) and in the development of a conception of discipline based on "purpose" in Human Understanding (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979). Also see, Robert C. Rowland, "The Influence of Purpose on Fields of Argument," Journal of the American Forensic Association 18 (1982): 228-45.

[4] There are a large number of works critical of Toulmin's notion of fields. An agenda for this criticism was outlined in David Zarefsky, "Persistent Questions in the Theory of Argument Fields," Journal of the American Forensic Association 18 (1982): 191-203. Perhaps the most detailed critique of Toulmin's view was offered in Charles Arthur Willard, Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge (University, AL: U of Alabama P, 1983) esp. ch. 3.

[5] Robert D. Denham, Northrup Frye and Critical Method (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 3.

[6]See, for example, A. T. Nuyen, "David Hume on Reason, Passions and Morals," Hume Studies, 10 (1984): 26-45; and Alasdair MacIntyre, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought,'" Against the Self-Images of the Age (New York: Schocker, 1971) 109-24.

[7] See Burke's discussion of metonymy as the dominant trope of science. Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 505-507.

[8] The troublesome case dealt with television advertisements directed at very young children before they are old enough to erect defenses against persuasion. This has been an issue hotly contested by a variety of interest groups. One would expect that students would be split on an issue when the communal standards are in transition.

[9] This is the distinction Stephen Toulmin has drawn between relativism and relativity. He explained this concept of relativity in Human Understanding:

> The intellectual strategy of relativistic physics is quite contrary to relativism. . . . . Einstein began, of course, by recognizing that measurements of spatial and temporal magnitude . . . involve a hitherto unsuspected relativity to the choice of 'reference-frame' or 'reference-objects'. What interpretation can be placed on such measurements depends on whether they are made and considered relative to, say, the surface of the Earth or a freely-falling elevator, a high-energy particle or a distant galaxy. Yet what exactly followed from this discovery? If we understood it as involving an outright relativism, we should then have to dismiss physical comparisons between different frames of reference as meaningless. Yet that was not Einstein's conclusions. On the contrary: he set out, instead, to establish general impartial procedures for making

just these comparisons (90).

[10] Ron Bontekoe, "The Function of Metaphor," Philosophy and Rhetoric 20 (1987) 209.

[11] Wayne Brockriede, "Arguers as Lovers," Philosophy and Rhetoric 5 (1972): 1-11. For a sophisticated interpretation of Brockriede's essay, see Nancy J. Legge, "Ethical Standards for Argumentation: An Extension of the Sexual Metaphor," Master's thesis, Indiana U., 1984, 12-23.

[12] Evan Blythin, "'Arguers as Lovers': A Critical Perspective," Philosophy and Rhetoric 12 (1979): 176-86.

[13] Robert C. Rowland, "On Defining Argument," Philosophy and Rhetoric 20 (1987): 148.

[14] Rowland, "On Defining Argument," 151.

[15] Rowland, "On Defining Argument," 156.

[16] We prefer the term "reasonable" to "rational" because the latter has so frequently been equated with formal logic. The word "reasonable" suggests that worthy argument is a product of context. But for the sake of clarity, we have used Rowland's term "rational."

[17] Rowland, "On Defining Argument," 150.